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**1776 and 1914, a Contrast in British  
Colonial Action**

by

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*1776 and 1914, A Contrast in British Colonial Action*

By SIR ROBERT A. FALCONER, K.C.M.G., LL.D.

(Read May Meeting, 1918)

The title is open to criticism, for the word "colony" is not now applied to Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa. They are "the overseas Dominions," and this fact proves that during the period which has elapsed since the American Revolution British Imperial Policy has been transformed. Though for some years the use of the word "colony" as applied to these countries has been almost obsolete, the significance of the new policy of the British Empire was not realised by the world until the consentient action of the self-governing dominions in August, 1914, as well as of India and the dependencies, revealed the vitality and spirit of this multifarious but integrated Commonwealth. Holland was amazed at the action of South Africa, even the United States did not expect such spontaneous and effective co-operation, and of course Germany, whose public men had been comforting their people with assertions as to the incoherence of their rival's vaunted empire, was chagrined. To this day she cannot understand the intervention of Canadians, Australians, and Boers in a struggle with which in her judgment they should have had no essential concern. Probably she did not fear the material aid which they might bring, for towards everything Anglo-Saxon of military quality she was consistently contemptuous; but the presence in Europe of these sons of hers overseas, and of others of almost every race and religion, was an unwelcome proof of a power which she had been unable or unwilling to detect, because according to her own theory empire depended upon a rigid constitution with a central autocratic government, whereas London could not by order summon to her aid or control those far-off dominions. So in the first week of the war one of Germany's greatest delusions as to the basis of world power was shattered.

Even Britain herself was surprised. Ever since the war began she has thankfully admitted that she built better than she knew, and has been profoundly moved by the political and economic efficiency of the Empire, as well as by the confidence in the Motherland that has been manifested by each several portion. It is only partially correct to say that Britain built better than she knew, for most of the building was done by her sons who had left her shores on their own

initiative to benefit their fortunes without any help from government. Though the Empire has come into being by an unpremeditated process, it is to Britain a token of her essential justice that issuing from this home, spring, and source, a spirit has interpenetrated the diverse parts and made them one. The Empire is not run by machinery. It is a body politic.

But what is it that creates the spirit of this Commonwealth? Why is the British Empire greater to-day than it was before the United States seceded? To answer these questions, it is necessary first to answer another. Why did the United States secede one hundred and forty years ago? In many respects Virginia had closer relations with Old England than with New England. The States would not unite even for their own interests. And yet in spite of intercolonial jealousies these communities combined to revolt from the Motherland, and that too under the leadership of Washington, who possessed the best qualities of an English gentleman, and is now regarded by British and Americans as an outstanding representative of the Anglo-Saxon race. Only very radical causes could have created a union for revolt out of such discordant States, especially as their action would not at that time seem to have been worldly-wise.

Of course no single motive is sufficient to explain this break from Great Britain. The character of the immigration, both the original and the later, was always a factor that produced dissidence from the ruling classes in England. The Puritan fathers of the northern colonists flung away from England under persecution, and doubtless their descendants had little sympathy with their overseas kinsfolk; a large and more recent immigration from Scotland and Ireland had brought with them the memory of grievances which persisted and caused them to harbour dislike for England as she was then governed. Moreover, the colonies had been losing their pure English quality as streams of German and Huguenot settlers had poured into new lands. Diverse though these elements were, soon a common system of education produced a type of average man different from the Englishman; and as time went on the American fashioned for himself powers of government and a political system unlike that which existed in England. Though the institutions within the several States did not resemble the British Parliament with its responsible government they gave rise to independence and self-reliance. There was no class in the Motherland which quite corresponded to the American colonist; those who governed England belonged to an order which for the most part could not understand him. It is not a matter for surprise that these peoples separated by the ocean, environment and social customs were time and again at cross-purposes, but unfortunately it too often



happened that tactless governors or stiff officials took no pains to comprehend and alleviate complaints, which when mishandled turned into grievances.

The people, however, would have been content to remain as they were in the enjoyment of the privileges of their several States and sharing in the proud history of England without a thought of national independence, had it not been that the colonial policy of England at that time was in itself an alienating factor. The relations between England and her colonies were not what they ought to have been chiefly by reason of the illiberal ruling principle then in vogue, that the colonies were retained mainly for the commercial interest of the Mother-country. The outcome of this principle was that if the local assemblies passed any legislation which might interfere with her trade, Parliament or the King would immediately veto it. England did not follow her sons with enough generous regard, nor did she expect loyalty from them as from members of a family. "Colonies were not looked upon as homes for a surplus population simply because England was not overpopulated. Hence emigration was not encouraged and there was no surer way to condemn a colony than to show that it tended to diminish the population of the Mother-country. Colonies were esteemed in the main solely for commercial purposes." (Beer) This selfish and material view of the mutual relations prevailed on both sides of the ocean; indeed it was so strong in the colonies that during the French war, which the English were waging, partly it is true on their own behalf but mainly for the benefit of the Americans, an illicit trade of such proportions sprang up between them and the enemy that the British generals often found themselves worse supplied with food than the French were, the war was thereby prolonged, and a root of bitterness was planted which continued to produce trouble. It was only natural that the English administration were amazed when the Americans gave them little support in arms and refused to take a share in the financial burden of a war, which they had made more expensive to the British taxpayer through their own illegitimate aid and comfort to the enemy. This was the deplorable result of commercialism.

But the Revolution would not have succeeded had the total grievances been a matter of trade. The interests of the colonies were too divergent to make that possible. Commercialism, however, challenged a principle which became clearer the longer it was challenged, and unfortunately in the northern colonies there was no inherited sympathy with the Mother-land to counsel patience with obstinate officials and endurance, until a party more friendly with them might succeed to power in England and redress their wrongs; though

even Virginia took fire once the principle of civil liberty was struck hard. On being taxed by the British Parliament the colonies felt that if they submitted they would be guilty of renouncing their freedom. The question at issue was one of political status, the right not to be taxed without representation which they believed was the supreme privilege of Englishmen and was the touchstone of political liberty. "In nearly every respect (the Colonists) governed themselves under the shadow of the British dominion with a liberty which was hardly equalled in any other portion of the civilized globe. Political power was incomparably less corrupt than at home, and real constitutional liberty was flourishing in the English Colonies when nearly all European countries and all other Colonies were despotically governed." (Lecky). It was not a matter of the amount of money involved in the taxing; that was trivial indeed in comparison with the cost of a war, and to have shed blood for the aggregate value of the taxes would have been a crime of the first order from which a man like Washington would have shrunk in horror. Acton has remarked in one of his letters which have been recently published:—"No dogma in politics is more certain than this; Liberty was at the point of death in 1773, and it was America that gave it life . . . The problem presented by the Americans was at bottom this—Should the existence of one's country, one's family be risked, one's fortune be ruined and one's children exposed to death, blood be shed in floods, all that be renounced which has been established by authority and sanctified by custom for an idea which is nowhere written down, which is purely idealistic, speculative and new, in contradiction with the constitution, which has no religious sanction for itself, nor legal credit, which is unknown to all order and legislators. The affirmative answer is the Revolution, or as we say Liberalism."

Washington, "the Father of his country," was a conservative, who felt that the action of the King, Townshend, Grenville and North was a breach of law, that they were overturning the foundations of freedom and that the defence of the right was of necessity placed in the keeping of the colonists. This also was Burke's view: "Those who have and who hold to the foundations of common liberty whether on this or on your side of the ocean, we consider as the true and only Englishmen." The leadership of Washington reveals in large part the deepest motive in the Revolution. He belonged to Virginia, was an aristocrat, an Episcopalian, a wealthy slave-owner, without special sympathy for democracy, and possessing friends in the finest English society. He must have been strongly attached to England, nor was he disturbed by the trade difficulties between the northern Colonies and the Mother-land, for he was a great landowner in a State that



gladly imported its manufactures from England and sent her tobacco in return. Neither incompatibility nor self-interest could have induced him to break away from England and join hands with democratic and puritan New England which hated Toryism and Episcopacy. Intensity of conviction alone carried him through years of great distress when he had to endure disappointments and disloyalty at the hands of various States and Congress. The winter at Valley Forge tested him to the utmost; again and again he saved the situation by his masterful character and dominating will. But his actions are not to be accounted for by mere stubbornness. He was really in spirit a great Englishman like Pym, Hampden, or Milton, who would take their country into war rather than abandon a principle of liberty, and his principle was similar to that of the English Civil War as stated by Ludlow: "The question in dispute between the King's party and us was, as I apprehended, whether the King should govern as a God by his will, and the nation be governed by force like beasts, or whether the people should be governed by laws made by themselves and live under a government derived from their own consent." (Quoted in Firth, *The Parallel Between the English and American Civil Wars*, p. 6). By the course of events the right of imposing taxation had come to be regarded as the supreme proof of a self-governing community, and until this right had been entrusted to them their status as freemen was not complete.

We turn to the other half of the English-speaking world. The creation of the American Commonwealth of set purpose and with a rigid constitution to which the legislative action of Congress must conform, is quite different from the rise and character of the present British Empire.

When the thirteen colonies revolted England was ruled at home by incompetent politicians and led in the field by feeble generals. It seemed as though she must do the wrong thing on every occasion. It was the Colonists not the British Government who were defending a true principle of genuine English political development.

The years that followed were among the darkest of England's history. Many thought that her day was near its close. Her greatest poet, Wordsworth, read the causes of her trouble in domestic conditions; and yet in the worst moments he never lost hope in her because he knew that the heart of the people was sound, that in it was a power, a spirit,

"whether on the wing

Like the strong wind, or sleeping like the wind

Within its awful caves."

But he scores the leaders, writing many years afterwards in 1810:

"In the course of the last thirty years we have seen two wars waged against liberty—the American war and the war against the French people in the early stages of their Revolution—And for what belongs more especially to ourselves at this time we may affirm—that the same presumptuous irreverence of the principles of justice, and blank insensibility to the affections of human nature which determined the conduct of our government in these two great wars against liberty, have continued to accompany its exertions in the present struggle for liberty, and have rendered them fruitless" (Tract On the Convention of Cintra.)

The voices of Chatham, Burke and Wordsworth had their effect. They recalled England to her true self and she began to set her own home in order. Her patriot sons had struck a note which overpowered the lingering discords of the old imperial policy, though it did not become clear and resonant till well on in the nineteenth century. A sense of responsibility for a Commonwealth greater than that which she lost in the revolt of the American Colonies was making itself felt. A new theory of Empire arose.

During the nineteenth century Britain became democratic, and the process by which the franchise was widened and changes were effected so that expression might be given to the will of the people, has been a large factor in the creation of the new policy of Empire which has almost insensibly displaced the old. Imperialism had been associated for the most part with that side of politics which drew its strength from the families who supplied the great soldiers and sailors, and who assumed that the prestige of expanding dominions was a continuance of the prowess of Elizabethan days. But in truth the Empire is not thus Imperialistic as to origin or character. It is not the result either of premeditated conquest or of set colonizing purpose. It can only be understood by considering the quality of the emigration from Britain, and the causes that stimulated it. No ruling idea, or special creed, or practice drove our Canadian forefathers out, as was the case with many of those who went to the United States, nor did they flee from England to a new land in the hope of securing wider freedom. Unlike the New England and the Pennsylvanian emigrations our people did not come to our present home to escape from a condition of affairs that was oppressive. They parted in goodwill from those whom they left behind with their eye set on the new land where they and their children might better themselves in a worldly way, and often their hearts turned back in affection to their kinsfolk overseas. Even their children continued to talk of Britain as "Home," and when after a generation through the favour of fortune their sons visited the old land, they sought the place of their

fathers and the branch of the family still living as the stock in the old soil.

To understand the new Empire it must be borne in mind that on the whole the population of Canada (apart from Quebec), Australia, and New Zealand was until recently fairly homogeneous, and that the incoming peoples were drawn from those classes in Britain which were by degrees receiving the franchise. These circles to whom the power of government was being entrusted were like the average type of person throughout the English-speaking world. In Australia even labour governments have been in power and New Zealand has surpassed all records in social experiment. But Canada was the first to make the endeavour to secure for herself the same privileges as her English and Scotch brothers enjoyed at home, and it was the striking success of this endeavour that has made the new Imperial structure possible. Responsible government has become a cohesive and vital principle, and Canada has a right to her primacy among the other young nations of the Commonwealth because within the old provinces of this Dominion that principle was first formulated and established.

Further the attachment to Britain was strengthened throughout the century by the frequent causes of trouble that arose between the Canadian provinces and the United States, even after the war of 1812, which were sometimes sufficiently serious to endanger the peace. The distinct individuality of the Canadian people cannot be understood unless their relationship towards the United States is taken into account. There never has been any serious trend towards annexation in any of the provinces, and many Americans assuming that there must be have been astonished to discover that their assumption was usually resented by Canadians. Most Americans understood very little about the character of Canada. During the past few years we have heard a great deal as to the part that Canada might play in bringing the United States and Britain together, but until the United States began to comprehend our national life and history, Canada would not have been an efficient interpreter. This fact is all the more surprising because there had been for many years an immense emigration from Canada into the United States. Ontario sent hundreds of thousands of her best sons and daughters into Ohio, Illinois, the middle West and California; and the Maritime Provinces were at times almost drained into the New England States; but the United States living to herself gave no thought to our difficulties or development, and Canadians were content to have it so. It is only within the last decade that a change became noticeable. Since the



opening of the war, however, we have received an attention from our Southern kinsfolk which is almost beyond our deserts.

It is not to be supposed that during the first half century that elapsed after the American Revolution the ruling classes in Britain had awakened fully to the promise and potency of the Empire that still was theirs: they feared to extend self-government to the colonists lest they should with the taste of freedom demand separation. Some indeed believed them to be a drag in the wake of the ship of state and would have been willing at any time to cut the painter and let them go. Lord John Russell, who might have been supposed to look with favour on the granting of responsible government, disappointed the hopes of the Canadians, and his action drew forth a remarkable series of letters from the Hon. Joseph Howe in 1839, from which I take this extract:

"Can an Englishman, an Irishman or a Scotchman, be made to believe, by passing a month upon the sea, that the most stirring periods of his history are but a cheat and a delusion; that the scenes which he has been accustomed to tread with deep emotion are but mementoes of the folly and not, as he once fondly believed, of the wisdom and courage of his ancestors; that the principles of civil liberty, which from childhood he has been taught to cherish and to protect by forms of stringent responsibility, must, with the new light breaking in upon him on this side of the Atlantic, be cast aside as a useless incumbrance? No, my Lord, it is madness to suppose that these men, so remarkable for carrying their national characteristics into every part of the world where they penetrate, shall lose the most honourable of them all, merely by passing from one portion of the Empire to another . . . My Lord, my countrymen feel, as they have a right to feel, that the Atlantic, the great highway of communication with their brethren at home, should be no barrier to shut out the civil privileges and political rights, which more than anything else make them proud of the connection; and they feel also that there is nothing in their present position or their past conduct to warrant such exclusion . . . Many of the original settlers of this province emigrated from the old colonies when they were in a state of rebellion—not because they did not love freedom, but because they loved it under the old banner and the old forms; and many of their descendants have shed their blood on land and sea, to defend the honour of the Crown, and the integrity of the Empire. On some of the hardest fought fields of the Peninsula my countrymen died in the front rank with their faces to the foe. The proudest naval trophy of the last American War was brought by a Nova Scotian into the harbour of his native town; and the blood that flowed from Nelson's wound in the cock-pit of the *Victory* mingled with that of a Nova Scotian stripling beside

him, struck down in the same glorious fight. Am I not, then, justified, my Lord, in claiming for my countrymen that constitution, which can be withheld from them by no plea but one unworthy of a British statesman—the tyrant's plea of power? I know that I am; and I feel also, that this is not the race that can be hoodwinked with sophistry, or made to submit to injustice without complaint. All suspicion of disloyalty we cast aside, as the product of ignorance or cupidity; we seek for nothing more than British subjects are entitled to; but we will be contented with nothing less."<sup>1</sup>

And this constitution the provinces got and kept, thanks to Lord Durham, Lord Sydenham and Lord Elgin. Never has any colony or dominion or dependency had three abler governors, and they became the architects not only of Canada but of the British Empire, which has just been proved to have been built on the most solid foundation, "natural affection, pride in their history, and participation in the benefits of a government combining executive power with individual liberty." (Howe).

The willingness to trust men of her own stock with liberty in the confidence that they would not mishandle such a priceless possession, has been the secret of Britain's success in the latter half of the 19th century as a colonizer and builder up of young nations. And this is a secret which most other nations have not learned and which they hardly realize that we possess. The battle having been fought in Canada was decided once for all, and the Empire was pervaded almost unconsciously by the new idea which created confidence in each part, and drew each to the Mother Country for which they had an antecedent affection.

The Imperial system, however, is not yet complete. We have for years been entrusted with our own fortunes within the Dominion of Canada. We enjoy provincial and dominion autonomy, but what about our relation to the outside world? This is now determined simply by our union with Britain. We cannot escape the dangers that beset her with her world-wide Empire. We know by experience that if she is at war we must be at war too. We would not, it is true, have it otherwise; at least those of us who belong to the English-speaking provinces. But hitherto we have had no voice in foreign policy. We have not had a representative even at Washington. Nor have we undertaken the obligations of our own protection, though in the present war indeed we have assumed a larger share of our defence than ever before. This condition cannot long remain so; the responsibilities of the future in a world so full of possible troubles are beginning

<sup>1</sup>The Speeches and Public Letters of Joseph Howe, Vol. I. 263.

to weigh upon us, and evidently we must enter into fuller partnership with Britain as regards these matters. How that is to be done is the question of the near future. The one essential principle seems to be that in taking a share in Imperial foreign policy we must not become thereby less truly Canadian, but rather complete our nationality in assuming greater obligations. Nothing affects us more than the sacrifice of our own sons. This reaches the very hearths of our homeland, and a policy that calls for such sacrifice is the most intimate of all. Therefore we cannot do the full duty of Canadians by living to ourselves within the Dominion; only by realising the new idea of Empire in common with Britain and the other Dominions can we gain sufficient control even of our domestic destinies.







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